

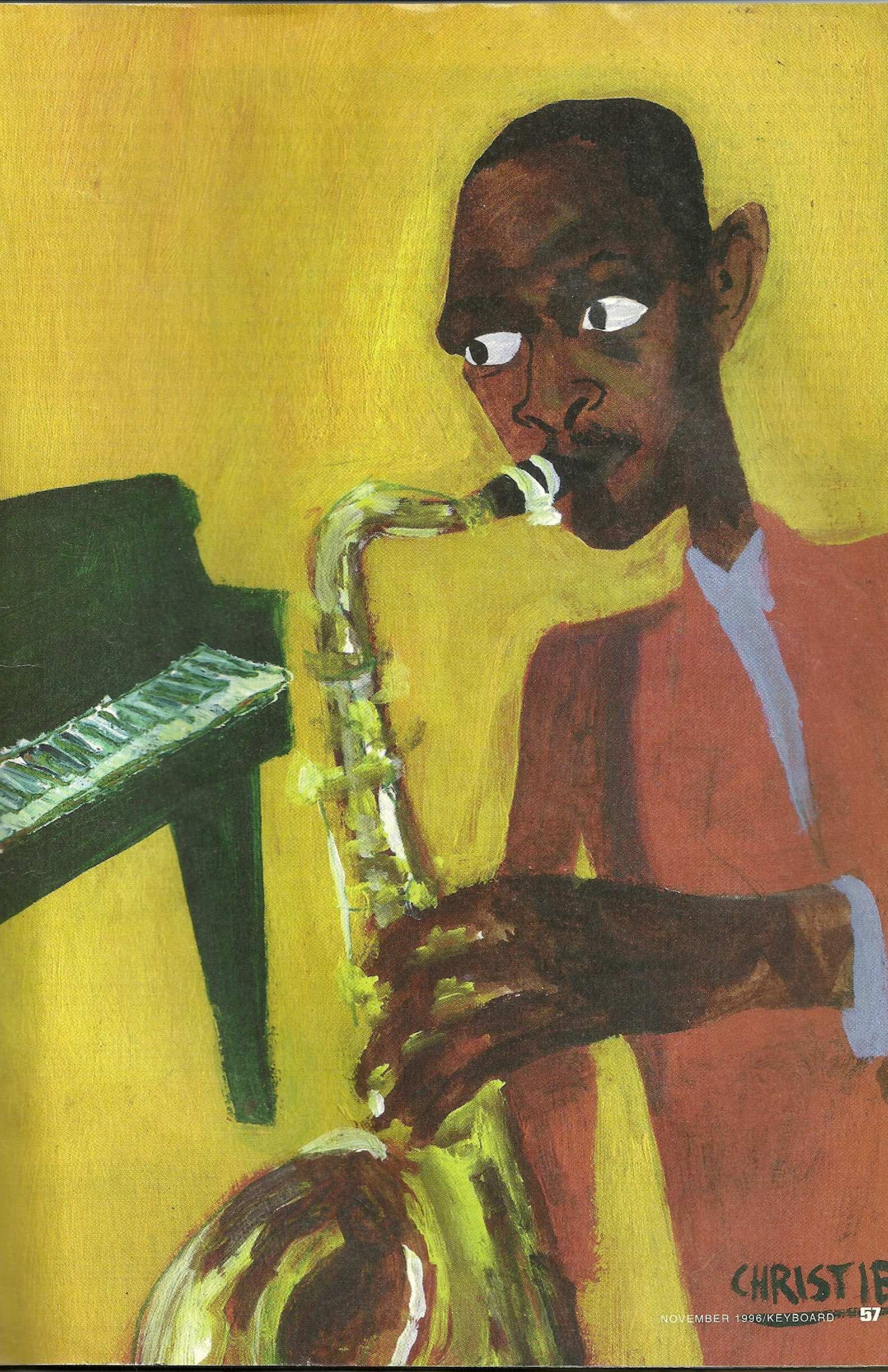
TWELVE STEPS TO

Giant Steps

1 IN 1959, JAZZ TOOK A "GIANT
2 forward with the release of John Coltrane's
seminal recording, *Giant Steps* (A&R).
Up to that point, jazz harmony had been
based on the blues and tunes steeped in the

progression as found in George Gershwin's
"Rhapsody in Blue" (see Keyboard, April '96). During the
first half of the 1950s, modal improvisation began to
emerge — playing on one chord over the course of
many measures. Miles Davis's sextet was at the forefront
of this movement, and John Coltrane was a
member of the group. At that time however, Coltrane
was pursuing more complex and active harmonic
movement, and his playing and compositions demon-
strated this exploration of harmonies. While playing
over single chords, Coltrane produced sheets of music
by running the tonalities up and down.

Ironically, it was later in his career when he
superimposed challenging harmonic progressions
over a single mode. In his compositions, he let the
harmonies loose. The use of ii-V-I's had been well estab-
lished, but their movements were somewhat predictable,
usually following a functional formula. With



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steps." Coltrane came across a progression that would impact future generations of improvisers and composers. While this progression contained some ii-V-I's, it also fragmented that progression, and introduced the concepts of arbitrary root movement and non-functional harmony. Coltrane said that the title comes from the fact that "the bass line is kind of a lopsided pattern in contrast to moving strictly in fourths or in half-steps." He has also been quoted as saying, "I feel like I can only hear so much in the ordinary chords we

usually have going in the accompaniment. I just have to have more of a blueprint. It may be that sometimes I've been trying to force all those extra progressions into a structure. I have a whole lot of things I'm working on, sometimes I find that I am playing them all at once."

Upon close examination "Giant Steps" reveals several patterns. At the core is the use of three tonal centers, B major, G major, and E \flat major. These roots, all major thirds apart, comprise an augmented triad. What Coltrane has done is to split the octave into three equal parts. Tonalities that are major thirds apart do not share many common tones, and unlike tonalities separated by minor thirds, they are not on the same diminished axis. As a result, there is no single scale, such as the symmetric diminished scale, that can be used as a thread through these tonal centers. While on the surface

Andy LaVerne



Jazz pianist, composer, and arranger Andy LaVerne has performed with Frank Sinatra, Stan Getz, Woody Herman, Dizzy Gillespie, Chick Corea, Lionel Hampton, Elvin Jones, and many others. His recording projects as a leader number over 30, the most recent being a duet with guitarist John Abercrombie, *Where We Were* (Doubletime Records), and a quintet recording, *Serenade to Silver* (SteepleChase). He has also recently released a series of instructional videos, *Guide to Modern Jazz Piano, Vols. 1 & 2*, and *Jazz Piano Standards* (Homespun Tapes). A new performance video, *In Concert* (Homespun), with John Abercrombie was just released as well. He is the author of *Handbook of Chord Substitutions* and the forthcoming *Tons of Runs* (Ekay).

it would appear that either a whole tone scale or a symmetric augmented scale could be used to tie the three tonalities together, they fall short. Thus, the first obstacle to playing "Giant Steps" changes appears. Switching gears rapidly seems to be the most logical way of negotiating these changes.

Coltrane was extremely fluent with the changes to "Giant Steps," but he didn't get there by chance. His compulsion for practicing is legendary, so we can logically conclude that his mastery of "Giant Steps" is

the result of many hours of practice. Listening to early "Giant Steps" from *The Heavyweight Champion: John Coltrane — The Complete Atlantic Recordings* bears this out. On a few of these, Coltrane actually stops in the middle of takes. It wasn't until a couple of months later that the now classic version of "Giant Steps" was recorded. The way to truly master the changes is to practice!

But what to practice? Just playing through the tune might not be enough. A more practical approach is to break the tune down, and in a manner similar to the way classical musicians practice, create exercises on the

fragments. Play through the tune to get the sound and feel in your head and hands (Example 1). Play it slowly and consider the form: There are three main phrases within the 32 bars, so we isolate elements of these phrases

Continued on page

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"Giant Steps" arranged for solo piano. Start slowly, and gradually work your way up to a blistering tempo of 150 half-notes per minute. (See text above.)

Chord progression for "Giant Steps" (32 bars):

Row 1: Bmaj7 D7 | Gmaj7 B \flat 7 | E \flat maj7 Am7 D7 | Gmaj7 B \flat 7 | E \flat maj7 F \sharp 7

Row 2: Bmaj7 | Fm7 B \flat 7 | E \flat maj7 | Am7 D7 \flat 9 | Gmaj7

Row 3: C \sharp m7 F \sharp 7 | Bmaj7 | Fm7 B \flat 7 | E \flat maj7 | C \sharp m7 F \sharp 7

The musical notation shows the 32 bars of the piece in treble and bass clef. Chords are indicated above the staff. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The tempo is 150 half-notes per minute.

This passage contains the ii-V-I progressions in the three tonal centers of "Giant Steps." The keys go down by major thirds, as found in the first two phrases of the line on this progression is quite diatonic, using scalar passages from the modes of the major scale, and outlining the chord tones. The standard rootless left-hand voicings follow natural voice-leading from chord to chord. (See text on page 62.)

Am7 D7 Gmaj7 Fm7 Bb7 Ebmaj7

C#m7 F#7 Bmaj7 Am7 D7 Gmaj7

Fm7 Bb7 Ebmaj7 C#m7 F#7 Bmaj7

Here the ii-V-I progression moves *up in major thirds*, as in the second half of the tune. I use pentatonic scales in the right hand this time. The left-hand voicings are open, using more fourths than thirds. These quartal groupings are sometimes called 9th, drop-7, or 13th voicings, depending on the chord tones in the lower or upper register. They also reflect the openness of the pentatonic intervals. One convenient application of pentatonics is to use the scale built on the 5th of a key over an entire ii-V-I sequence; i.e. the D major pentatonic for Am7-D7-Gmaj7. (See text on page 62.)

Am D7 Gmaj7 C#m7 F#7 Bmaj7

Fm7 Bb7 Ebmaj7 Am7 D7 Gmaj7

C#m7 F#7 Bmaj7 Fm7 Bb7 Ebmaj7

Ex. 4. Here I've made a common substitution in each of the ii-V-I's, that of the suspended V7 for the ii7. This simplifies the left hand, and the pedal points on V of each progression give this example a floating quality. The right hand part uses the major pentatonic built on V, breaking the scale up into patterns. Note which scale degrees the patterns emphasize; continue the progression and the patterns down by major thirds through B major and back to G major. (See text on page 62.)

Chord progression: D7sus4, D7, Gmaj7/D, B \flat sus4, B \flat 7, E \flat maj7/B \flat , etc.

The right hand part uses the major pentatonic built on V, breaking the scale up into patterns. The left hand part features suspended chords and pedal points.

Ex. 5. This example uses the same left-hand voicings as Ex. 4, but the progression goes up by major thirds. Continue this example through E \flat major and back to G major. Note how the major pentatonic pattern on V in the right-hand fits into the various keys. (See text on page 62.)

Chord progression: D7sus4, D7, Gmaj7/D, F \sharp 7sus4, F \sharp 7, Bmaj7/F \sharp , etc.

The right hand part uses the major pentatonic pattern on V in the right-hand fits into the various keys. The left hand part features suspended chords and pedal points.

Ex. 6. This example isolates the major 7th chords, moving up and down by major thirds. The quartal left-hand voicings put either the 3rd or 7th in the lowest voice; both emphasize the 13th. (See text on page 62.)

Chord progression: E \flat maj7, Gmaj7, Bmaj7, Gmaj7, E \flat maj7, Gmaj7, Bmaj7, Gmaj7.

The right hand part uses the major 7th chords, moving up and down by major thirds. The left hand part features quartal voicings.

Ex. 7. Next, let's play just the ii-Vs without the I chords. Here I use common rootless left-hand voicings, and major scale modes with chromatic passing tones in the right. (See text on page 62.)

Chord progression: C \sharp m7, F \sharp 7, Fm7, B \flat 7, Am7, D7, Fm,maj7, B \flat 7, C \sharp m7, F \sharp 7, Am7, D7.

The right hand part uses major scale modes with chromatic passing tones. The left hand part features common rootless voicings.

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we can learn the tune from the inside out. Some suggestions for practicing Examples 2 through 13 (found on pages 59, 60, 62, 64, and 66; the 12 steps, remember?): Play them slowly; as you build confidence, strength, and facility, gradually increase speed. Experiment with different rhythmic feels, such as bossa nova, rock, ballad, and swing. Use the notated right-hand lines as a guide and springboard for your own improvisations. By changing one or two notes in a line, you can make it your own, then

extrapolate from there. The left-hand voicings are suggestions; apply your own rhythmic ideas to them.

Now that we've dissected "Giant Steps," let's put all the pieces back in place. At first glance, these might appear like a strange set of chords with no relationship other than being major thirds apart. But what's behind this formula? Looking at it historically, there are tunes who preceded "Giant Steps" that used the major third relationship, mostly as a brief modulation. The one with the most extensive use of

Continued on

Ex. 8. Now strip the tune down to only the V chords. In the left hand I use rootless voicings on the 3rd or 7th, and in the right hand I use a variation on the major pentatonic scale on V (1, 2, 3, 5, and 6), the dominant 7th pentatonic, which consists of the 1, 2, 3, 5, and b7. (See text above.)

Ex. 9. Here are all the I chords, this time with their corresponding Vs. I use the major pentatonic on V over the I chords, the dominant pentatonic over the V7 chords. (See text above.)

Ex. 10. This example has the same elements as Ex. 9, but it moves right along at two beats per chord, modulating down by major thirds. Notice the use of sequences in the right hand. (See text above.)

Ex. 11. Like Ex. 10, this isolates tonics and dominants, but moves up by major thirds. (See text on page 62.)

Ex. 11 musical score showing a sequence of chords: E \flat maj7, D7, Gmaj7, F \sharp 7, Bmaj7, B \flat 7. The score is in 4/4 time, with the right hand playing a melodic line and the left hand playing a bass line.

Ex. 12. Another two-beater, this starts with V7s instead of tonics, and moves down by major thirds. (See text on page 62.)

Ex. 12 musical score showing a sequence of chords: D7, Gmaj7, B \flat 7, E \flat maj7, F \sharp 7, Bmaj7, D7, Gmaj7, B \flat 7, E \flat maj7, F \sharp 7, Bmaj7. The score is in 4/4 time, with the right hand playing a melodic line and the left hand playing a bass line.

Ex. 15. Here the left hand is playing "Giant Steps" changes, while the right is playing a reduced ii-V-I progression, as indicated by the upper chord symbols in bars 1 and 7. It sounds dissonant, but it works. (See text on page 74.)

Ex. 15 musical score showing a sequence of chords: Fm7, Bmaj7, D7, B \flat 7, Gmaj7, B \flat 7, E \flat maj7, C \sharp m7, Am7, D7, Gmaj7, B \flat 7. The score is in 4/4 time, with the right hand playing a melodic line and the left hand playing a bass line.

Ex. 15 musical score showing a sequence of chords: F \sharp 7, E \flat maj7, F \sharp 7, Bmaj7, Bmaj7, Fm7, B \flat 7, E \flat maj7, Am7, D7. The score is in 4/4 time, with the right hand playing a melodic line and the left hand playing a bass line.

Ex. 15 musical score showing a sequence of chords: Gmaj7, C \sharp m7, F \sharp 7, Bmaj7, Fm7, B \flat 7, E \flat maj7, C \sharp m7, F \sharp 7. The score is in 4/4 time, with the right hand playing a melodic line and the left hand playing a bass line.

Ex. 13. This example uses the same principle as Ex. 12, and moves it up by major thirds. (See text on page 62.)

Chord progression for Ex. 13:

D7 Gmaj7 F#7 Bmaj7 Bb7 Ebmaj7 D7 Gmaj7 F#7 Bmaj7 Bb7 Ebmaj7

Ex. 14. "Coltrane Changes" (the lower chord progression) can be used as the basis of an improvisation over a ii-V-I, or can replace it entirely. Play through the changes slowly, and transpose them to all keys. (See text on page 70.)

Chord progression for Ex. 14:

Am7 Bb7 D7 Ebmaj7 F#7 Gmaj7 Bmaj7 D7 Gmaj7

Ex. 16. Conversely, we can play "Giant Steps" in the right hand, and use dominant pedals based on the reduced ii-V-I progression in the left. As in Ex. 15, this creates a feeling of tension and release. (See text on page 74.)

Chord progression for Ex. 16:

Bmaj7 D7 Gmaj7 Bb7 Ebmaj7 Am7 D7 Gmaj7 Bb7

Ebmaj7 F#7 Bmaj7 Fm7 Bb7 Ebmaj7 Am7 D7

Gmaj7 C#m7 F#7 Bmaj7 Fm7 Bb7 Ebmaj7

Example 16 continued on page 68

Ex. 16 continued from page 66.

16 C#m7 F#7 Bmaj7 D7 Gmaj7 Bb7 Ebmaj7 Am7 D7

21 Gmaj7 Bb7 Ebmaj7 F#7 Bmaj7 Fm7 Bb7 Ebmaj7 Am7 D7

27 Gmaj7 C#m7 F#7 Bmaj7 Fm7 Bb7 Ebmaj7 C#m7 F#7

Ex. 17. "Step by Step" puts a new head on the changes to "Giant Steps." (See text on page 74.)

1 Bmaj7 D7 Gmaj7 Bb7 Ebmaj7 Am7 D7 Gmaj7 Bb7

6 Ebmaj7 F#7 Bmaj7 Fm7 Bb7 Ebmaj7 Am7 D7

11 Gmaj7 C#m7 F#7 Bmaj7 Fm7 Bb7 Ebmaj7 C#m7 F#7

◀ Continued from page 62

third relationships is "Have You Met Miss Jones?" by Richard Rodgers, written in 1937. The bridge of this tune has three tonal centers, $B\flat$ major, $G\flat$ major, and D major. Each is preceded by a ii-V. Coltrane took this idea, condensed it, and expanded it, resulting in a much more challenging progression. The real key to unlocking the Coltrane formula is the way he used this progression in the context of a ii-V-I sequence (Example 14, page 66). This complex substitution was used by Coltrane in several tunes, both originals and standards, including "Countdown," "Fifth House,"

"Exotica," "Central Park West," "26-2," "Satellite," "But Not For Me," "The Night Has a Thousand Eyes," and most notably "Body and Soul."

With this in mind, let's take another look at "Giant Steps." Replace an F minor chord and an $F\#7$ before the first B major of the first system. Then we have a complete Coltrane ii-V-I substitution in $E\flat$. (Compare with Example 14, which shows a Coltrane ii-V-I substitution in $E\flat$.) This means that you can look at the first three bars of "Giant Steps" as a ii-V-I in $E\flat$! Then all we need to do is replace the A minor at the beginning of bar 3 with a $C\#$ minor, and we have another

Continued

Further Listening

The following recordings, among others, contain versions of "Giant Steps": *The Heavyweight Champion: John Coltrane — The Complete Atlantic Recordings* (Rhino/Atlantic), *Giant Steps*, John Coltrane (Atlantic), *Alternate Takes*, John Coltrane (Atlantic), *Giant Steps*, Woody Herman (featuring yours truly on piano) (Fantasy), *Coltrane's Sound*, John Coltrane (Atlantic), *Remembering John*, McCoy Tyner (Enja), *Giant Steps: In Memory of*

John Coltrane, Tommy Flanagan (Enja), *Blue in Green*, Mike Richmond w/Richie Beirach (SteepleChase), *This Is the One*, Dick Wellstood (Audiophile).

The following Jamey Aebersold recordings are useful tools for studying "Giant Steps": Vol. 3: *The ii-V-I Progression*, Vol. 16: *Turnarounds, Cycles and II-V7s*, Vol. 68: *Giant Steps*, Vol. 28: *Giant Steps*, John Coltrane (Aebersold Publications, Box 1244-D, New Albany,

IN 47151-1244. 800-456-1388; fax 812-949-

The following recordings, all released on Atlantic Records except where noted, contain tunes with "Coltrane Changes": *Coltrane's Sound* ("The Night Has a Thousand Eyes," "Body and Soul," "Satellite," and "Central Park West"), *John Coltrane* ("Exotica") (Vogue), *Swing*, *The Coltrane Legacy* ("26-2"), *My Favorite Things* ("But Not For Me"), *Coltrane* ("Fifth House"), *Giant Steps* ("Countdown

Ex. 18. Another new tune set to the changes of "Giant Steps," "Uncommon Tones" makes use of melodic sequencing. (See text on page 74.)

Ex. 20. "In a Melatonin" takes on a completely different character (as the title might indicate) by starting the tune with the end of the first phrase of "Giant Steps," changing some chord qualities, and putting it in a different time signature. The right-hand figure at the end of the coda is a transcription of Coltrane's signature to "Giant Steps." (See text on page 74.)

1 D7sus4 D7 G7sus4 B \flat 7 \flat 5 \flat 9 E \flat 7sus4 E \flat 7

7 F \sharp 7sus4 B7sus4 B7 B \flat 7sus4 B \flat 7 \flat 5 \flat 9 E \flat /B \flat Aaug7 \sharp 9

13 D7sus4 D7 \flat 5 \flat 9 G/D D \flat aug7 \sharp 9 F \sharp 7sus4 F \sharp 7 \flat 5 \flat 9

19 B/F \sharp B7sus4 B \flat 7sus4 B \flat 7 \flat 5 \flat 9 E \flat m11 G \flat 7 \flat 9

25 B7sus4 D7 \flat 5 \flat 9 Gm11 B \flat 7 \flat 5 \flat 9 E \flat m11

Example 20 continued on page

continued from page 70

the ii-V-I substitution, this time for B major. To demonstrate this, Examples 15 and 16 (page 64 and 66). If you ever wondered about playing "outside," this is certainly a valid method to get you there. The root of many of Coltrane's more "out" excursions.

Now we're ready to see the result of all this work. I've written a tune of heads on "Giant Steps" changes to illustrate the idea that negotiating these complex changes is simplicity (Examples

17 and 18, pages 68 and 70). This is reinforced with the four-note pattern (Example 19, page 75) that appears in Coltrane's first chorus from the classic Atlantic recording, which in fact contains many of the techniques found in these exercises.

Rather than just leave it there, I've taken it one "Step" further and written a tune based on many of the devices we've learned from "Giant Steps" (Example 20, page 72). Try it out, and see where taking some "Giant Steps" can lead you! ■

continued from page 72.

A7#11 Bb7sus4 Bb7b5b9 Eb7sus4

Coda

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Nobody could say it the way Trane did. Here is the first chorus of his solo from the Atlantic recording date, with left-hand voicings. Study it for the techniques we've used in this article. (See text on page 74.)

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